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NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. BIDEN. Mr. President, I want to say a few words about the admirable work of the Senate Armed Services Committee. For the past two years, we have had budget agreements that have forced the Committee to make tough choices with shrinking resources. Under the able leadership of Chairman Thurmond and the Ranking Member, Senator Levin, the Committee has once again enhanced the quality of life for our brave men and women in uniform and have invested in programs vital to our future fighting forces. As the Ranking Member on the Foreign Relations Committee, I am constantly reminded of how vital a strong military is to protecting American interests and security around the world. I have said it before and I'll say it again, for diplomacy to be effective, not only must it be adequately funded, it must also be backed by a strong military and superior intelligence activities.

But, Mr. President, before I say any more about this bill, I want to say a word or two about Chairman Thurmond. His service to this nation has been truly remarkable. From the beaches of Normandy to the halls of the U.S. Senate, he has shown an outstanding dedication and commitment to doing the work of this nation. He and I worked together on the Judiciary Committee for 12 years--he was Chairman for the first 6 years and I was Chairman for the last 6. Then, as now, he has been a leader by example. He is one of the most remarkable individuals I have ever had the privilege of working with. We are not merely colleagues, we are friends.

He has served on the Armed Services Committee for 40 years, the last 4 of which he has been its Chairman. This is his last year as Chairman, so I want to say now what deep respect I have for the Senior Senator from

South Carolina's military expertise and for the able manner in which he has worked with Senator Levin to keep our military strong. The Committee, the Senate, and the American people have gained from Senator Thurmond's leadership and his willingness to work with Senators from both parties to put America's national security interests ahead of partisan interests.

This bill is an example of that. It includes a 3.1 percent pay raise for military personnel. It also includes an important increase in hazardous duty incentive pay for mid- and senior level air crew personnel. I thank my colleagues for joining me in addressing that concern and showing these experienced personnel that we value their unique and vital contribution to America's national interest.

In addition, there is an important \$12 million increase in C-5 airlift squadrons research and development. This money is critically needed by the Air Force to examine the needs of these crucial aircraft as new technology becomes available to improve their performance. As many already know, the C-5 is capable of carrying more cargo than any other aircraft in our military. It has supported military operations from Vietnam to Desert Storm to the current operations in Bosnia and the Persian Gulf. I applaud the Committee's foresight in providing the money necessary to maintain these planes at peak performance levels.

Mr. President, I also want to take a minute to talk about the health care demonstration programs in this bill. With the growth in the number of retired military personnel, the rising costs of health care in general, and the closing of military bases, great strains have been placed on military medical facilities. This,

in turn, has placed in some jeopardy the idea of guaranteeing high quality health care to our military retirees.

Last year, Congress recognized this growing problem, and we took a step in fixing it. Last year's Defense Authorization bill included a demonstration project on Medicare subvention--where Medicare reimburses military medical facilities for the treatment of retirees who are also eligible for Medicare. I am pleased that the Dover Air Force Base in Delaware has been selected as one of the six sites for this national demonstration project.

Again, this was a first step. But, there are other ways that might help us to fulfil our commitment to military retirees. And, so I strongly support the three additional health care demonstration projects in this bill--one to allow military retirees to participate in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program once they reach age 65; one to allow retirees to continue their eligibility for TRICARE and not have to switch to Medicare when they turn 65; and one to allow military retirees who are also eligible for Medicare to continue to participate in the Department of Defense's mail order pharmacy program.

Providing health care is an obligation we owe to our military retirees. It is a promise we made--but a promise that is now in jeopardy. The health care demonstration projects in this bill will not solve the problem we face. They are, after all, only demonstrations. But, hopefully, they--along with last year's Medicare subvention demonstration project--will help point the way to a solution so we can ensure that the federal government upholds its commitment to the men and women who so bravely served our country.

Mr. President, this bill includes an amendment that I joined with four colleagues in voting against yesterday. It was a compromise Sense of Congress resolution offered by Senator Levin, Senator Coats, and Senator Thurmond, regarding budgeting for continued participation of United States forces in NATO operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The three cosponsors deserve credit for their hard work in having crafted what was, in the main, a very

well thought out amendment. It contained several positive elements. And their compromise amendment was far preferable, in my opinion, to another amendment on U.S. forces in Bosnia, which Senator Hutchison and Senator Byrd were considering introducing.

Nonetheless, I voted against the compromise amendment, and I would like briefly to explain the reasoning behind my vote.

First, I agree with the amendment's intent to keep the pressure on our European allies to constitute the bulk of ground forces in the Stabilization Force, known popularly as SFOR. I want to clarify, however, that non-American forces already make up approximately three-quarters of the SFOR total.

Second, I am in complete agreement with the amendment's not giving a date-certain for the withdrawal of United States ground combat forces from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such a date-certain would constitute the worst kind of micro-management of military affairs by the Congress, and would quite likely endanger the lives of American troops on the ground.

My principal reason for voting against the compromise amendment is that I do not agree that our goal should be a withdrawal of all United States ground combat forces from Bosnia and Herzegovina as long as a NATO-led stabilization force remains in that country.

To be perfectly candid, Mr. President, I believe that such a move would serve to undermine American leadership in NATO. Even Combined Joint Task Forces, commonly known by their CJTF acronym, should, unless there are exceptional circumstances, have a U.S. ground combat force component. While American air, naval, command and control, logistical, and intelligence support, and even a ready reserve over-the-horizon force in the region would be vital to any future mission, the participation of some American combat ground forces will remain a vital bona fide of U.S. commitment to Alliance operations.

In other words, for the United States to retain control of NATO-led operations, we must be present in all

components of missions, including on the ground. This would apply to any follow-on force in Bosnia, whether it is NATO-led or is a CJTF with the Western European Union.

Let me pose a question to my colleagues. If the Bosnia ground operation becomes a purely European affair, do they not think that pretty soon some of our European allies will begin to question whether an American should continue to serve as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)?

I for one think the answer is yes. The compromise amendment, against which I voted, may, I fear, begin to set in motion a process that will severely erode American leadership in NATO.

Lest anyone thinks that my fears are far-fetched, I would remind my colleagues that France has already called for a European to take over command of Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH) in Naples and that initially the French were supported by

several other European allies.

Keeping a contingent of U.S. ground combat troops in all NATO and NATO-led missions is a powerful symbol of American leadership and is recognized as such by allies and potential foes alike. We should think long and hard before advocating a change in that policy.

Mr. President, I will conclude where I began. I compliment the managers of this bill and the Armed Services Committee for providing a bill that continues to strengthen our nation's national security. It enhances the quality of life of our loyal and dedicated men and women in uniform. It addresses important weapons systems needs and takes steps toward finding the best way to meet our health care obligations. While I disagree with the Bosnia provision added for the reasons I've already mentioned, I think this bill gives America the strong military it needs to support our diplomatic work and to promote our national security interests.